

National Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This registered service is a branch of the National Fostering Agency. This is a private company, which operates across England, Scotland and Wales. This registered office is based in Lowestoft. It covers an area consisting of East Anglia, and the North of England. All support social workers are home based.

The agency offers placements for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, mothers and babies, sibling groups and children who need to be placed alone. They have 385 approved foster carers and 461 children in placement.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency has some notable strengths and provides outstanding outcomes for children and young people. They provide good information on foster carers and their families, match children and carers very well and provide high levels of support for carers. Potential problems with placements are identified and additional support is provided. This all helps to provide stable placements that meet children and young people's needs very effectively over significant periods of time.

Carers and the agency help young people to achieve well in their education, take part in a wide range of beneficial activities and to manage and improve their

behaviour. There is a high level of consultation with young people and they are listened to. This helps to promote their involvement in their day to day lives and to keep them safe. Children and young people speak very highly of their carers and the differences that they have made to their lives.

The successful bridge to foster initiative provides children and young people with exceptional opportunities to experience and benefit from a family life, either with carers or through a return to their birth families. There are very good relationships with placing authorities and other agencies which help to shape the service the agency provides and helps to safeguard children and young people. The agency provides good carers and takes effective action to address any shortfalls or inappropriate behaviour by carers.

There is some high quality and varied training, but not all carers have fully taken part in it. There is some work to address this, but it is not consistent across the agency and so has not been fully effective. The fostering panel plays an important role in ensuring the quality of assessments and the suitability of carers. However, panel minutes do not fully and accurately reflect this.

Shortfalls identified at the previous inspection have been effectively addressed.

The agency provides carers with all available information on children and young people, including any areas of risk taking behaviour. This enables carers to provide safer care. However, there are not always clear and relevant risk assessments. Nor is there always on-going discussion and monitoring of how carers are working to reduce the risk taking behaviour.

Areas for improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
17 (2011)	provide foster parents with such training as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. This relates to ensuring carers take part in appropriate and timely training, including achieving the training and development standards in a timely way. (Regulation 17(1))	31/12/2014

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation (NMS 14.7)
- implement a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. This relates to monitoring and reviewing levels of risk and action taken by carers to reduce risks (NMS 4.5)
- ensure there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service, this relates to foster carer training and how it is recorded. (NMS 25.1)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The outcomes for children and young people are outstanding. They are provided with easily understandable information on foster homes before they move in. Consequently, they can have some knowledge of the carers and their household, which can reduce their anxiety. When appropriate they can also be involved in making decisions on the placements and do so in a more informed way. When talking about the decision to move to a foster home with the agency, one young person said it was the best decision ever made. Many young people stay in their placements for long periods, amounting to several years. This provides them with stability and the opportunities to develop strong attachments. Some young people spoke incredibly warmly and positively about their carers. One spoke about the quality of the carers completely changing her life and the feeling that she had finally got a home. Children and young people are treated as part of carers' families and benefit from normal, family-based experiences.

A small, but significant group of young people have also benefitted enormously from the agency's Bridge to Foster initiative. This allows young people who would not normally succeed in foster care to be looked after by experienced carers, who are well trained for the task and who receive good quality therapeutic support. As a result of this the young people have been able to make successful transitions to foster families or to return to their birth families. Without this work it is highly unlikely that these young people would have been able to enjoy such success.

Children and young people have very good opportunities to express their views and be involved in the running of the agency. There are consultation groups for young people and some have been involved in setting questions for potential employees, which they have recorded on a DVD which is played to the applicants. The agency are in the process of appointing a children's ambassador to further improve the information and outcomes for children and young people. Young people are helped to take responsibility for their own behaviour. Social workers commented on how well carers have helped young people to improve their behaviour.

Children and young people make high levels of progress in their education. They

receive very effective support from carers, who in turn are supported by the agency. This can include considerable commitment to transporting young people so they can stay in their school, but also recognition of when a change of school is in the young people's best interests. Children and young people have very good attendance at school and are recognised by the schools for the progress they make. Some young people attributed their significant progress in education to the care that they have received. This contributes to their educational attainment and life chances. They also have wide ranging opportunities to take part in recreational and sporting activities. Participation in such activities leads to enjoyment for children and young people, it also allows them to experience a full and rewarding childhood. Achievements in these areas are recognised by the agency and some young people have appeared in local press as a result of outstanding achievement and charity fund raising. This recognition, be it praise for doing well at school, or appearing in a newspaper, boosts children and young people's self-esteem.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency recruits a wide range of carers. The diversity of carers matches the diversity of the children and young people well. When placements are made that do not match the child or young person's cultural or religious background, work is done to ensure that they can develop a good awareness of their heritage and sense of identity. Placements are provided for children and young people with complex needs. The agency provides timely and high quality therapeutic support to help maintain placements and to ensure they are successful. Children and young people are matched very well with the foster homes they go to. Referrals are not accepted if the agency do not feel they can make a suitable match. This helps to promote effective and successful placements. There is a very low incidence of placement breakdown, in the last year this has dropped to 1% of total placements. This reduces the upset and disruption that young people experience when a placement ends unexpectedly.

Training is provided for foster carers. This includes training on solution focused brief therapy, which provided for Bridge to Foster carers, as well as others. Carers say this training is effective and of a good standard. A wide range of training is available for carers, including on-line training and seminars delivered at support groups and in some cases to individual carers who have been unable attend a course. Records show that a significant amount of carers have not had first aid training. The Registered Manager says this is due to a problem in their recording which was highlighted during the inspection. While the number is higher than records show, some carers have not had first aid training. Consequently, they may not be able to respond appropriately to a medical emergency. The number of training course that the agency expects a carer household to attend has dropped from three a year to two a year. It is usually the primary carer who attends the training. Some second carers do attend training, or complete on-line training, but others have not attended training for periods up to several years. Team managers make comments on carers' attendance at training as part of their annual reviews, but these are not always sufficiently robust. For example, one team manager urged the carers to contact them

to discuss any problems about attending training, rather than making the contact themselves. In some cases there is evidence of supervising social workers discussing with carers the benefits and need to attend training, but this is not consistent. Overall there is some good quality training that effectively meets the needs of carers and supports them to provide a high standard of care for children and young people. However, not all carers are attending training to fully support them in providing high quality care to young people. The majority of carers achieve the training, support and development standards, but not all of them achieve this within 12 months, as set out in National Minimum Standards.

Carers receive regular supervision and support from their supervising social workers. They say that support is constantly available 'only a phone call away' and 'brilliant'. The agency are quick to respond when carers require support. This helps to ensure the high quality of placements and to prevent breakdowns. Respite care is provided when it is in the child or young person's best interest. This includes when it is required to support carers and maintain a placement. When respite care is provided the agency seek to do this in a way that is sensitive to the needs of, and reduces the disruption to children and young people.

Carers understand their role and make children and young people feel part of their families. Young people say that they are supported by carers. Placing social workers and commissioning officers are very complimentary about the quality of foster carers and the placements they provide. One social worker complimented the agency on the extremely settled, safe, secure and loving environment that the carers were providing.

The foster panel helps to promote safe, secure and stable placements. They identify issues that need to be answered by the workers presenting the carers to the panel, or by the carers themselves. However, the foster panel minutes do not show that these questions are asked and satisfactory responses received. Panel members can give accounts of the answers for recent panels, but failing to keep accurate records of this does not show a consistent and robust audit trail of discussions and the reasons for recommendations. The fostering panel comments on the quality of all assessments of carers. This helps to ensure that assessments remain of a good standard. Issues or concerns identified during assessment are thoroughly followed up. This provides an effective safeguard to reduce the possibility of inappropriate people caring for children.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Carers help children and young people to take age-appropriate risks, which helps them to develop the skills and knowledge to protect themselves. Children and young people know how to complain and are listened to. Supporting social workers regularly see children and young people alone when they visit the home, including when they do unannounced visits. This helps to provide a good level of safeguards for children and young people.

Carers are aware of areas of risk for children and young people. They are provided with information about previous risk taking behaviour and can use this to help them provide safer care. However, they do not have written risk assessments to inform their practice and records do not show that supervising social workers discuss areas of risk with carers at supervisions. Consequently, carers practice in reducing and reviewing levels of risk to children and young people is not always monitored and reviewed to ensure its efficacy.

Carers actively identify if young people are at risk due being missing from care and vulnerable to child sexual exploitation. This leads to multi-agency responses that help to safeguard children and young people and support them in changing their behaviour. The agency is particularly active in making placing authorities aware of concerns and pushing for timely and appropriate responses. There are very strong relationships with other agencies which support the safeguarding of children and young people. Carers are made aware of the importance of safeguarding children and young people. This is covered in the skills to foster course and in easily available policies and procedures. If carers do not act in ways that safeguard children and young people, the agency identifies this and takes appropriate action to improve practice or review the carers' suitability. Agency staff are aware of the whistleblowing policy and would feel confident in using it. This all helps to ensure that poor or inappropriate practice is identified and can be addressed to help safeguard children and young people. Carers say that if they are subject to allegations, they are supported by the agency. Local Authority Designated Officers say that the agency responds appropriately to safeguarding issues and work well with them. They do not have any concerns over the agency's practice in relation to safeguarding.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The Registered Manager has strong working relationships with placing authorities. In some cases this has helped to identify areas of development, such as bridge to foster, which have provided significantly better outcomes for young people. Placing authorities say that the agency is able to respond well to their needs. Managers have good knowledge of individual children and young people. The Registered Manager provides good management and leadership. Shortfalls identified in the previous inspection have been effectively addressed.

Foster carers have recently been expected to write and send in monthly reports on children and young people. This provides information on progress or problems for managers and also for placing authorities. It allows for any problems to be identified and addressed so the impact on children and young people can be minimised. Managers and workers are suitably qualified and experienced to fulfil their duties and run the service to meet the needs of children and young people.

Children and young people have opportunities to engage in a wide range of activities, either through their lives with foster carers, or through activities arranged

by the agency. These have included participation with a group that arranges sailing for children and young people with disabilities. Having such opportunities widens children and young people's experiences and can help to raise their self-esteem.

There are a wide range of processes in place to help managers monitor the service and the impact they are having on the lives of children and young people. The vast majority of these are effective, but while there are some plans in place to address shortfalls in training some areas of the IFA, these have not yet had a sufficient impact across the whole of the service. Consequently, records of the training carers have attended are not always accurate and some carers have not had essential training, for example, in first aid.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guide are clear and comprehensive. The children's guide has been produced in other languages to meet the needs of some young people for this information. The agency sends details of significant events to Ofsted and other relevant agencies. The systems for doing this have been reviewed and this has led to a more effective and timely system. This allows Ofsted, as a regulator to monitor significant issues relating to children and young people.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.